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AN AMERICAN “CLASSIC”: HILLMAN AND CULLEN’S *MIMES OF THE COURTESANS*

THOMAS E. JENKINS

This is a study in classical reception, one that examines the ways in which a work of erotic classical literature was appropriated in the 1920s for a specific social and artistic goal: pornography with a point. More specifically, I analyze how Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, a work often located on the periphery of the classical canon, became a nexus of sorts for (homo)sexual discourse in the 1920s and 1930s, and how a specific edition of this work demonstrates the interplay between contemporary social trends and the interpretation of the classical world. In 1928, the charmingly named Press of Classic Lore—an outfit that managed to “press” just one book of classic lore—paired the (apparently gay) translator A. L. Hillman with the (also apparently gay) illustrator Charles Cullen; the resulting collaboration speaks volumes about the ways in which the texts of the classical world served as fodder for those desiring a more open discourse concerning homoerotic and otherwise marginalized sexualities. This study concludes with a trenchant example of how cultural interpretation—even mine—continues to be affected and molded by contemporary social forces.

The cultural anthropologist Bernard Arçand identifies Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Courtesans* as “the first frankly pornographic work in Western literature” (Arçand 1993.126).¹ So much depends, of course, on

1 Arçand next refines his definition of true pornography: “We must take it as given that pornography is a modern phenomenon by virtue of its two major traits: its massive availability, and the separation it makes between sex and the rest of human experience.” The relatively limited circulation of texts before the invention of the printing press leads Arçand to exclude from his study pre-modern sexually explicit works.

one's definition of pornography; one might be hard pressed to defend a definition that lumps together Attic Greek memoirs and glossy centerfolds. In terms of etymology, however, Arçand's definition can hardly be faulted: Lucian's piece really is the "writing" (*graph-*) of "prostitutes" (*pornê-*), a delicious mélange of gossip, boasting, backstabbing, and desire among the chatty hetairai, "courtesans," of ancient Athens. Though never crude, Lucian's courtesans do not pull their erotic punches. The prostitutes frankly discuss lesbianism, infidelity, the act of deflowering, pederasty, and above all, the no-nonsense, mercenary aspects of sex.

The translator of the Press of Classic Lore's Lucian volume, A. L. Hillman, adopts a combative tone in his preface to the translation; Hillman defends himself from future charges of obscenity by launching a preemptive strike.² Hillman acknowledges that the act of translating Lucian's *Mimes* into English is a risky maneuver, one engendering some peril in his contemporary social climate. He is hopeful, however, that wider circulation of Lucian's work will confirm that the ancient and modern worlds can now share a similarly cavalier and healthy attitude towards all types of sexual expression (Hillman 1928, preface):

The translator has endeavored to keep constantly in mind the kindly humanism with which Lucian wrote these tales so descriptive of one phase of Greek life. Lucian discusses intimate sex details with the frankness of one not immoral, but influenced by a system of morals that finds everything that is natural both beautiful and good.

These dialogues can hardly be offensive to the intelligent modern; for, somehow, our own civilization is changing, and as it becomes richer and fuller, it seems to have more in common with the civilizations of antiquity.

Two facets of Hillman's extraordinary introduction deserve extended comment. The first is the delicately couched phrasing that informs much of the 1920s discourse on homosexuality: the critics' traditional charge of "immo-

2 Hillman's full name does not, in fact, appear in the translation itself but only in the copyright request filed with the copyright office; the preface is signed enigmatically "ALH." I am assuming for the sake of grammatical simplicity in this article that Hillman is a man. The copyright request also lists Herman G. Shapiro as co-translator (see below, note 7).

rality” and a rebuttal that focuses instead on the concept of the “natural”—a naturalness that leads directly to the revelation of the quasi-Platonic “beautiful and good.” The second facet is the notion of *progress*, and of a “changing” of the world for the better, through artistic as well as legal means.³ What is fascinating about this Lucian volume—including its enigmatic preface—is that it melds contemporary trends in classical scholarship with contemporary trends in art and literature; the two impulses reinforce and reify the other.

For instance, in the late 20s, the scholar Paul Brandt completed the German edition of his three-volume *Sittengeschichte Griechenlands* (1925–28), which he published under the pseudonym Hans Licht (an act perhaps indicative of the professional embarrassment then attached to such studies). This was later adapted and translated as *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*, published in 1932, again pseudonymously. In the latter volume, Brandt devotes an entire chapter to Lucian’s chatty hetairai and notes (a bit optimistically) that “Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Courtesans* afford us a deep insight into the manners of the *demi-monde* of Greece” (Licht 1932.388). For Brandt, the literary aspects of the work are less important than its *historical* riches; Brandt takes at face value that Lucian “sketches for us a picture extremely rich in colouring of the varied life of the hetairae in its manifold gradations” (Licht 1932.342). This is an important point: Brandt’s view of prostitution—and of ancient sexual practices in general—is a sympathetic one, and Brandt treats *The Dialogues of the Courtesans* as a window to the natural sexuality of an older, franker, and (most surprising of all) superior world. This is exactly the stance adopted by Hillman in his preface to the Lucianic volume when extolling the riches of antiquity.

For Brandt, the Greek way of life trumps the modern experience precisely in its freedom of natural sexual expression, particularly homoerotic expression. In his earlier *Beiträge zur Antiken Erotik* (1924), Brandt surveys a wide variety of ancient erotic literature and art in compelling and eminently scholarly fashion. His forty-page introduction, however, constitutes a bitter, mad tirade against contemporary German culture, and one can

3 The invocation of intelligence seems to be a trope linked to modernism’s strong associations with advertising: a 1929 ad for the magazine *Vanity Fair* also links successful modernism with smarts: “MODERNISM is sweeping *the intelligent world*. You find it in music, in the arts, in literature . . . There is a way, an easy way, to know and enjoy the newest schools of modern thought and art . . . This form is the magazine *Vanity Fair*” (*Vogue*, Jan. 2, 1929, p. 14; emphasis added).

see why the item was issued (like the Lucian volume) only in a private impression.⁴ Brandt's freestyle introductory rant culminates in a twelve point list (Licht 1924.39–40) concerning the type of German man who (point number 1) "seeks and discovers the joy of love in the arms of other young men." Point 2 clarifies this notion, while taking a swipe at Germany itself: "This type of man does not marry. Therefore, he produces neither consumers for the state nor cannon fodder for the Kaiser. He has, however, produced intellectual efforts of high and highest rank." Next, Brandt draws on his research specialty (point 5): "Entire peoples (for instance, the Ancient Greeks), have prospered on account of their sexual peculiarity, and have in fact flourished through centuries because of this peculiar feature." Brandt then asserts (point 10) that "Research into sexuality has established that the primary sexual orientation of man is bisexual, which of necessity involves homosexual love." He rounds off his points with the truly wrenching lament: "And now the peak of grotesquerie: the Jew is hanged; the man who loves young men instead of women belongs in jail—and in fact, according to the latest penal code, belongs in the Penitentiary. He is stripped of rights and banished by 'Civilization.'"

For Brandt, research into ancient sexuality can redress this failure of the current "Civilization" by softening the "prudery" and "disgust" of contemporary readers. He concludes his fulminations with the following *mot* (Licht 1924.41): "Virtue is knowledge, as Socrates taught. It is imperative to collect the facts in order to combat ignorance; this is the aim of the present book." In his later, more popular book on ancient sexuality, Brandt tones down the rhetoric, but the didactic tone is still implicit: history is a tool for learning. For instance, here is Brandt's take on "natural sexuality" (Licht 1932.3): "The inmost nature of the Greeks is naked sensuality, which, indeed, rarely becomes brutality—as in the case of the Romans—but yet impresses its stamp upon their collective life, while the confession of sensuality or its manifestations in life is unchecked by rigorous state laws or the hypocritical condemnation of public opinion." Brandt's final phrase neatly demonstrates the collision of the academic and the social, as Brandt's professional research on ancient sexuality confirms his sense of *contemporary* hypocrisy.⁵ His sense of outrage turns to envy when he confronts the

4 In total, only 500 copies of the *Beiträge* were printed, and the title page sternly warns that the volume belongs only in the hands of "librarians, scholars, and collectors."

5 See also the brief survey of Paul Brandt's career in Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin 1990.10–12.

ancient sexual schema of the Greeks in light of modern sexual attitudes (Licht 1932.525): "Because the fascinations of the sexual were not made still more alluring by being shrouded in a veil of mystery or branded as sinful and forbidden, and—further—because the almost unchecked sensuality of the Greeks was always dignified by the desire for beauty, their sexual life developed in overflowing force, but also in enviable healthiness." Here the sly insertion of "enviable" illustrates Brandt's brand of progressivism: the model of the Greeks is to be absorbed and emulated. Failure to do so will result only in continued envy for a culture that happily pursues beauty in whatever form it may take. On this view, modern conceptions of gender and desire are constrictive and restrictive: the Greeks, to their credit, followed nature's true course. Adherence, then, to natural desires constitutes a victory for those who—like the translator Hillman—see in nature the genesis of everything "beautiful and good."

At the same time that Brandt was advocating a return to classical *mores* in his scholarship, parallel trends developed in American artistic communities, particularly in New York City. A letter composed by the Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen in 1922 (Reimonenq 1993.144) illustrates how a reading of Edward Carpenter's classically-themed *Ioläus* (1917) caused him as a young man to ponder traditional interpretations of the classical world. Carpenter, a prominent late nineteenth-century British advocate for sexual liberation and for a utopian world of Uranists, turned to ancient history—or a construction of that history—as a tool for social change. By extracting passages from world literature—including Greek and Roman literature—on the theme of "friendship," Carpenter sought to demonstrate both friendship's ubiquity and its firmly traditional nature. "Friendship" in this context constitutes a carefully coded discourse for homosexual relationships, and the majority of Carpenter's examples have strong homoerotic overtones: Hercules and Ioläus, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, The Sacred Band of Thebes.

Carpenter's overarching aim was to demonstrate how modern sensibilities had ignored the ancient evidence for homosociality (here, friendship) as an integral, respected aspect of the human experience (Carpenter 1917.iv): "The degree to which Friendship, in the early history of the world, has been recognized as an institution, and the dignity ascribed to it, are things hardly realized to-day. Yet a very slight examination of the subject shows the important part it has played." As Carpenter elaborates, far from rebuking friendship, ancient societies granted it a type of human dignity, and, indeed, encoded same-sex intimacy within their quotidian social

framework. Unlike Carpenter and his Uranist outcasts, ancient “friends” were welcome participants in a society that viewed such friendship as a healthy and natural institution. Countee Cullen, upon devouring Carpenter’s work, was greatly moved by that author’s evocation of this ancient, utopian past: “[*Ioläus*] opened for me soul windows which had been closed; it threw a noble and evident light on what I had begun to believe, because of what the world believes, ignoble and unnatural. I loved myself in it.” For Countee Cullen, the extracts from antiquity prompted self-searching and, consequently, a self-awakening; on the basis of the ancient texts, he rejects the notion of friendship as unnatural, and revels (if only momentarily) in its noble aspects. In this instance, a collection of ancient sources provided the key for self-examination and discovery of the “natural” self; it also provided the impetus for Countee Cullen’s later homoerotically-charged poems.

The second part of Hillman’s introduction to Lucian therefore melds together the posturing of both classical scholars and artists influenced by the classical tradition; the preface jettisons notions of sexual unnaturalness (the horror of Carpenter and Cullen), while asserting the general superiority of the classical world to the modern (the tack of Brandt). Hillman goes so far as to assert—rather pugnaciously—that any truly “intelligent modern” could not find Lucian’s dialogues offensive. The implication is that those who *do* find the dialogues offensive—for their homosexuality, their sado-masochism, and so forth—are *prima facie* unintelligent. However, the last clause of the preface espouses as well a cautious optimism. Hillman expresses confidence that America is shedding its outmoded standards for offensiveness and embracing the richness and fullness that it has “in common with the civilizations of antiquity.” In this sense, Hillman’s preface ends on an upbeat note; a proper appreciation of Lucian will make evident that the America of the 1920s is *progressing*, is becoming superior to the narrow-minded America that preceded it. Modern “sex details” may now be invoked alongside ancient ones, and “frankness” of discourse need not be an exclusively archaic trait.⁶ Hillman’s translation of the Lucian volume

6 An earlier edition of *Dialogues of the Courtesans* by the celebrated French author Pierre Louÿs makes a similar point: the ancient and the modern worlds are not so different, at least as refracted through Lucian. In his original 1894 preface to his translation, Louÿs writes (Congrat-Butlar 1973.x–xi): “Every time I have translated familiar conversations from the Greek, I have been surprised and amused by the startling coincidences between the Greek spirit and the French spirit . . . one takes pleasure in translating Lucian: one has the illusion of turning him back into his original language.” Even Louÿs’s later redactor and editor, Congrat-Butlar, is seduced by this notion (1973.xi): “Reading the *Mimes of the Courtesans*, one is touched to see to what degree the *petites femmes* are of all time.”

constitutes a purposefully polemic act, one that challenges contemporary readers to partake in sexual discourse in the same way that Lucian's ancient readers would: with kindness, frankness, and above all, humanity.

TEXT AND TRANSLATION

Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* is one of a series of four dialogues; its companions are *Dialogues of the Dead*, *of the Sea Gods*, and *of the Gods*. Each work, chock full of allusions, is characterized by witty, urbane Attic Greek and is squarely aimed at a sophisticated audience. The form itself is most instructive: Lucian took a time-honored tool for profound philosophical discourse—the noble and generically-charged dialogue format of Plato and Xenophon—and peopled it instead with corpses, blowhards, rapscallions, and prostitutes. *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, in particular, is awash in apparent superficiality: most dialogues concern money, sex, or (most usually) the exchange of one for the other. The only philosopher to appear is a certain Aristaenetos, who (in a particularly spirited jab at Socrates) is derided as a lecher and corrupter of young men (10.4). Lucian draws most of the characters in *Courtesans* from the stock figures of New Comedy, including the love-sick and impoverished young men, the money-grubbing madams, the naïve prostitutes, the braggart soldiers, and the rest. The use of these Menandrian characters naturally gives a comic sheen to the proceedings; this is a work that takes its fun seriously.

When aiming for literalness, Hillman's translation of *Courtesans* is technically adept, even impressive, and seems to be the work of a translator well versed in Greek and in allusions based in Greek culture.⁷ A brief reference to 'Αλωα (7.4), for instance, is expanded to a full, helpful phrase ("a day of Aloa, a feast of Demeter," 26), and oaths and other allusions to gods are similarly glossed for the Greekless. In general, the prose is clean and unadorned, eschewing foreign expressions, and aiming for elegance rather than a workman-like trot. Hillman's layout, complete with *personae dramatis*, emphasizes the theatrical form of the dialogues by presenting the work more nearly as a play or mime; this format allows the translator to include occasional stage directions that enhance the flow of the dialogue

7 For the sake of completeness, it must be noted that copyright records show that Herman G. Shapiro was a co-translator; his name is nowhere found in the volume itself. I suspect that Shapiro was an expert consulted for his Greek and that Hillman composed the actual translation, but certainty is impossible. For ease of reading, I am including only Hillman's name when referring to choices in translation.

("scandalized," 14; "weeps," 15; "Lysias goes out," 43; "nauseated," 104). Such stage directions occasionally interpret or comment on Lucian's text directly, such as the soldier Leontichus's "bombastically" phrased opening salvo to his innamorata (101) or the courtesan Myrtale's caustic concluding remarks to her impoverished lover Dorion, marked as "ironically" quipped (125). In these instances, Hillman implicates himself hermeneutically as a guide to Lucian's text, digesting in advance the tone and tenor of the original Lucian and informing the reader, as translator and editor, how the subsequent passage should be received by its audience.

It is all the more surprising, therefore, that, in light of Hillman's general fidelity to Lucian's text, the translator should choose to omit certain passages wordlessly and without explanation. It is even more surprising that Hillman should *insert* passages of his own creation, again without attribution. The omissions are usually of lines or phrases, though sometimes longer: the mother's long speech at 7.4 (Μόνος . . . βλέπων) is excised entirely. It consists of a rebuke to her daughter Mousarion's dreams of marrying a penniless young man, a scene straight out of New Comedy. Hillman may have found the speech repetitious. In the so-called "Lesbian Dialogue," the character of Megilla's lesbian "wife" Demonassa is given short shrift, and the cloying invitation to a ménage à trois (κάθευδε μεθ' ἡμῶν μέση ἀμφοτέρων, "Come sleep betwixt us both," 5.2) is excised in favor of moving more rapidly to the moment in which the "husband" Megilla tears off her wig and reveals her lesbian nature. An entire section of dialogue 11, between Charmides and Tryphena, is cut (11.2–3), in which the courtesan Tryphena attacks a rival for having a skin disease that "makes her mottled as a leopard from neck to toe." Again, the excision is performed invisibly by the translator for the sake of brevity and swiftness of pace.

More interesting, however, are the *additions*, which nearly always exaggerate the sexual or racy aspects of the text: in his preface, Hillman admits to admiring Lucian's frankness concerning "intimate sex details" and apparently has no scruples about adding a few of his own. The ending of dialogue 13, between Leontichus and Chenidas, is a case in point. Leontichus, a consummately braggart soldier, manages to scare off a courtesan, Hymnis, by boasting of a particularly revolting execution on the battlefield. In the transmitted text of Lucian, the dialogue nears its conclusion when Chenidas, a friend, rebukes Leontichus for his tactlessness (13.6): "Choose then one of two things: either continue being loathed for your prowess or admit that you have been lying and spend the night with Hymnis." Hillman's "translation" considerably expands Chenidas's speech (107–08):

I am afraid, my friend, that you must choose either to pass for a brave man and be hated, or to confess that you have lied beautifully and sleep tonight with pretty Hymnis. And by Aphrodite and Uranian, she is worth the shame of confession! The girl has a body like the dream of a well-fed soldier. Little, hard breasts like apples. Soft, resilient thighs that could unman the most gigantic of Satraps! And those dimples! Ah, Mother of Heaven, those dimples! The girl told you, Leontichos, before you started on your stories, of course, that she had a third dimple that was much more attractive. A third dimple! Ah, a third dimple! Oh, comrade, I know you will either humble yourself this evening or pass a sleepless night. I, myself, am to see Ampelis, who is, to all appearances, twice the age of the little Aphrodite whom my Mars has just scared away.

The insertion betrays some small signs of its origins, particularly in noting that Hymnis mentioned her dimples “before you started your stories”—that is to say, before the received Lucianic text of dialogue 13 (though the Greekless reader could not know this). The oath by Uranian is also curious, and not particularly Greek. But what is most remarkable is the language Hillman employs to describe Hymnis, including the phrase “the girl has a body like the dream of a well-fed soldier,” which, at first glance, appears to mean that the girl’s body is what postprandial soldiers dream of. But the grammar—like many of Lucian’s sexual situations—is ambiguous: perhaps the body is, in fact, masculine, the dream of a soldier. (As we shall see, many of the illustrations of the volume depict muscular, androgynous men: strength and gender ambiguity are hardly mutually exclusive.) Hymnis’s resilient thighs are lauded for their ability to “unman the most gigantic of Satraps,” a *vagina dentata* that changes the gender of those in sexual contact with it. Hymnis’s two dimples are joined by a hidden third—presumably on the small of her back—which at least indirectly points to the possibility (and anticipation) of intercourse *a tergo*. In this particular case, Hillman’s insertion of additional sex details attempts to bring the gap between ancient and modern by crafting new dialogue in a risqué, Lucianic vein.

In the second dialogue, the courtesan Myrtium upbraids her lover Pamphilus for (apparently) abandoning her for another woman. Pamphilus disabuses her of her folly, and swears that he would never have let Myrtium hang herself out of desperation. He also concludes with a surprising, even

sweet coda (2.4): “[Your suicide] could never have happened. I would never have been so crazy as to forget my Myrtium, especially since she is carrying my child.” Hillman makes a surprising addition (67): “PAMPHILOS: It will never, never happen. I am not so foolish. I will never forget my Myrtion, especially when she carries a child of mine in her belly. How I would like to lie with you now! You are even more beautiful with your belly bulging big. Oh, Myrtion, let me! MYRTION: Have me, dear Pamphilos! But lean lightly.” Nowhere else in the dialogues is pregnancy explicitly referred to: sex in these dialogues is generally non-reproductive, severed from its ties with such heteronormative institutions as marriage and childrearing. Part of Hillman’s program in his introduction is to stress the naturalness of impulses that might, to some twentieth-century eyes, seem shocking; a courtesan’s pregnancy, however, is not shocking (indeed, perhaps too commonplace). Therefore, Hillman appends a randy coda in which Myrtium’s bulging belly incites in Pamphilos a desire for (paradoxically) non-procreative sex; Myrtium is equally passionate, though pragmatic (“lean lightly”) given the circumstances. The generally romantic tenor of the dialogue is undermined by Hillman’s surprising coda, which ends the dialogue by beginning a seduction.

Lucian’s fifteenth dialogue, between the courtesans Cochlis and Parthenis, features the most surprising addition by Hillman. Parthenis relates to Cochlis the events of a particularly disastrous banquet. Crocale, a third hetaira, rebuffed a military man, Deinomachus, who couldn’t afford her hefty price tag; Crocale instead frolicked with a rich farmer. However, the soldier returned later in the evening with a number of his comrades, accosted the unwitting farmer, and plunged the banquet into mayhem. Crocale managed to escape during the brawl, but Parthenis was not as lucky. In Lucian’s original, Parthenis complains (15.2): “After Deinomachos hit me, he shouted ‘Blast you!’ and threw at me my broken flutes.” Hillman takes the violence much further (94–95):

As for me, Deinomachos slapped me good and hard and called me “Ball of Smut” and threw my flutes in my face. Then two of his soldier friends tore my robe and tunic off my body and played with me. They slapped and beat me about my thighs till my nether part was burning red. Then they lifted their own tunics and made me sink down in their laps so that I felt very much ashamed. Then they obliged me to take between my lips, saying “Try a new melody, genial little flute player!”

The translation after the first sentence quoted above is entirely Hillman's invention (though "Ball of Smut" is already a stretch for a general imprecation). Hillman appears to have expanded on Lucian's three salient characteristics of Deinomachus's crude treatment of Parthenis (physical violence, embarrassment, and the conjunction of flute and face) and included yet more beating, abject shame, and a ribald double-entendre on blowing a flute. Apparently, Hillman was aiming for greater shock value or perhaps titillation: the partial disrobing of the soldiers adds yet another element of voyeurism to an already prurient scene, and the reference to fellatio (coily signaled by the ellipsis) brings the actual assault to a startling close. The dialogue concludes with Parthenis's fervent hope for justice and Cochlis's cautionary words about affairs with military men.

Ninety-five percent of Hillman's translation is exactly that: a translation. Thus Hillman's occasional omissions and even more occasional additions beg for interpretation. In his foreword, Hillman complains that "the task of a translator is not an easy one. A rendition which a few years ago might have been entirely satisfactory would now be considered literal, stilted, and uninspired. And so, in our modern requirements for an effective version, something more is demanded than a merely accurate translation of words or even phrases; instead, a genuine appreciation of atmosphere, spirit and intent is insisted upon." The key word here is "effective": it is not enough for the translation to be just aesthetically pleasing, a rare and hermetically sealed classical jewel. It must have an *effect*, must either give offense or shirk its duty. Hillman's over-the-top additions, then, of breasts, dimples, fellatio, and the rest go beyond the literal meaning of the original: for Hillman, the spirit is the thing, and he adopts a hieratic posture as one who can convey—even improvise—a truly Lucianic *geist*. Only by providing a properly construed and translated work can the "intelligent modern" hope to perceive the links between the civilization of 1928 and "the civilizations of antiquity."⁸

8 On occasion, Hillman betrays a romantic strain in his translation. The original ending of the Cochlis/Parthenis exchange (15) runs as follows: "But as for these men who shake their plumes and narrate their battles, they are just noise, O Parthenis!" Hillman's version (95) sounds nearly Tin Pan Alley: "Anyhow, those flaunters of plumes and tellers of martial tales are never serious lovers. What do they know about love!" Love is a curious word in connection with these dialogues: there is much desire, but the vision of, e.g., a Fred Astaire-Gingers Rogers romance is far from the mercenary ethos of the original text.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Not the least extraordinary aspect of this volume is the cross-fertilization of ideas between translator and illustrator, between text and image. Hillman's translation of Lucian is in itself fodder for discourse about the proper reach and presentation of sexuality in 1920s America, particularly deviant sexuality; however, the Art Deco illustrations to the Lucian volume by Charles Cullen—no relationship to Countee Cullen—constitute an even greater surprise. Evidently taking his commission as a license for bold visual expression, Cullen seeks, like Hillman, to exaggerate the pornographic and erotic elements in Lucian, presumably in the name of social activism.

As an artistic movement, Art Deco did not subscribe to any single set of artistic principles or to a social doctrine per se. An outgrowth of, and reaction to, Art Nouveau, Art Deco took its inspiration from the rapid technological advances between the two world wars, an era bursting with new methods and machines of manufacturing. Plastered on billboards, magazine covers, and posters, Art Deco graphics glorified the instruments of a new age: automobiles, oceanliners, skyscrapers, fancy boudoirs, and chic Parisian fashion. Its ideological underpinnings are difficult to pin down; Bevis Hillier argues (1968.84): "Art Deco could be seen as either a Communist or a Fascist manifestation. It was Communist in that its ultimate aim was to produce the designs best adapted to mass-production. It was Fascist in that it could easily be made, in its less abstract forms, into the instrument of a totalitarian government or a vehicle for racialist propaganda in the supposed democracies." Hillier refines his comments (1968.98–99) when arguing that Art Deco, in its essential, capitalistically-based conservatism, maintains an "insistence on the moral-didactic purpose of art."

Lucy Fischer's recent study on Art Deco and gender, however, steers away from such totalizing claims and looks harder at representations of the body and sexuality in the visual language of Art Deco (2003.27): "In truth, a discourse on sexual difference (either literal or metaphoric) informs the entire Art Deco aesthetic." Fischer further argues that representations of women in Art Deco, as opposed to Art Nouveau, become (2003.29) "more austere, high-tech, and neutral" and that careful androgyny is as much a feature of the Art Deco style as haute couture negligees. Lucian's *Courtesans*, in its celebration of the carnal, seems a natural inspiration for an artistic movement that challenges "intelligent moderns" to rethink notions of gender and the body.

Unhappily, little is known about the illustrator Charles Cullen, apparently a gay white man who found a home in the heady atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance.⁹ As Cary Nelson notes in his brief biographical sketch of the artist, Cullen remains to this day “one of the more fugitive among the visible book illustrators of the period” (1989.279, n. 93). It is indicative of the struggles of a biographer when the most helpful information comes from the dust jacket blurb on Cullen’s 1933 illustrated edition of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. As the jacket states, the artist was born in Leroy, N.Y., in 1889, attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and studied a year abroad before returning to the States. Other sources indicate that he soon found work as an occasional illustrator for magazines—including *Scribner’s* and *Collier’s*—and in the next two decades turned out illustrations of Countee Cullen’s works: *Color* (1925) and *Copper Sun* (1927), as well as *Mimes of the Courtesans* (1928), *The Grub Street Book of Verse* (ed. Henry Harrison, 1929), *American College Verse* (ed. Henry Harrison, 1932), *Contemporary American Men Poets* (ed. Thomas Del Vecchio, 1937), and the enigmatic volume *Jesus the Christ* (1944), a retelling of the gospels that, in contrast to Cullen’s earlier provocative work, features oddly subdued, mystically charged depictions of the Christ narrative.¹⁰

Cullen appears to have been attracted to projects that involved, to a greater or lesser extent, the element of social agitation (as adumbrated by his translator, Lucian falls into that category). The volume *Contemporary American Men Poets*, illustrated by Cullen, makes class struggle an essential component of its message. In his preface to the volume, the editor Thomas Del Vecchio rages against conceptions of an artist as an effete Bohemian unwilling to engage larger social issues (Del Vecchio 1937.3): “All artists are propagandists *per se* . . . when the time demands, art becomes the inflammatory substance that kindles action, levelling [sic] one social system that a better might replace it.” Del Vecchio’s rhetoric is overtly socialistic,

9 For more on Charles Cullen and his influence on the Harlem Renaissance, see Lewis 2000. For a catalogue of prominent Art Deco artists and illustrators of the period, see Delhay 1977.5–15. The illustration *Nu* by Paul Véra (Delhay 1977.11) embodies some of Cullen’s stylistic traits, including the strong contrasts of white/black, cross-hatching, and the fetishizing of the nude female form. McClinton 1972.211–14 offers a brief catalogue of French and American illustrators, particularly the American Rockwell Kent. In a more general vein, Battersby 1988.99–110 offers an account of the rising popularity of Art Deco illustration in the chapter “Book Production and Posters.”

10 To my knowledge, this is the first time that *The Grub Street Book of Verse* has been added to Cullen’s bibliography.

attacking the “vicious privileged class which stops at nothing to maintain its wobbling supremacy.” For his part, Cullen sketches illustrations that dovetail with Del Vecchio’s poetic selections: depictions of hopelessness, urban confusion, and despair, though not without an undercurrent of optimism.

Intriguingly, Cullen takes identical tacks in his approaches to the illustration of the poet Countee Cullen *and* to Lucian. I wish briefly to analyze an illustrative example of how Charles Cullen makes explicit a social challenge only hinted at in a text—in this case, a smoldering homoeroticism. (I shall argue that Cullen employs similar strategies in his illustrations for *The Mimes of the Courtesans*.) The first two stanzas of Countee Cullen’s poem “Tableau,” from his volume of poems, *Color*, record the promenade of two men—one black, one white—under the distrustful gaze of their neighbors (14):

Locked arm in arm they cross the way,
 The black boy and the white,
 The golden splendor of the day,
 The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,
 And here the fair folk talk,
 Indignant that these two should dare
 In unison to walk.

The indignation that the pair arouses is not, in the first instance, inspired by their sexual proclivities but by their *race*; both the fair and dark folk sniff at the couple because they dare to walk in unison, though of different colors. To underscore the point, Countee Cullen sketches stark antitheses throughout the poem: black/white, day/night, lightning/thunder (lines 11–12)—all of which point to the overarching theme of racial transcendence through the transgression and obliteration of these “natural” boundaries. Though the first lines hint at a erotic context, with the boys “locked arm in arm,” the motif is quickly dropped in favor of highlighting the racial tensions inspired by the stroll in lockstep.

Charles Cullen’s illustration of “Tableau,” by contrast, highlights just those homoerotic aspects that Countee Cullen underplays and, by so doing, comments on the emerging sexual ethos of the Harlem Renaissance. Charles Cullen ignores entirely the leering dark and fair folk, and focuses instead on the sexual enticements of the two boys. His illustration (figure 1)

highlights the gay subtext: both figures appear enticingly bare-chested, with the pretty, slim white man gazing haughtily skyward as the black figure encircles the white man's waist with a delicately placed hand. The poem's introductory phrase "arm and arm" is here loosely interpreted; "in sultry half-embrace" would more adequately capture the spirit of the illustration. Though Charles Cullen includes the motif of "day and night" with a sparkling half-sun and a starry sky, all other aspects of the poem are elided; Charles Cullen instead accentuates the effrontery of a pair that defies racial and, more importantly, sexual norms.¹¹

Cullen pursues an identical strategy in his illustrations for the Lucian volume and, in this respect, echoes the sentiments expressed in the preface to the translation: the "intelligent modern" will find no cause for offense in Lucian's world of Athenian courtesans. Indeed, Cullen "pushes the envelope" in his over-the-top depictions: for dialogues *already* racy and replete with sexual details, Cullen provides illustrations that test the limits of the "intelligent modern's" willingness to confront explicit sexual behavior, particularly behavior that falls outside the range of generally accepted sexual practice.

Cullen's illustration of Lucian's Parthenis/Cochlis dialogue—one of his most powerful—spares the reader very little in its depiction of the sexually charged assault scene (figure 2). Parthenis, on the left side of the illustration, struggles with one of the soldiers, who greedily gropes her breasts and torso as the two others gaze on in voyeuristic bliss. The rightmost soldier blends characteristics of both male and female, a careful study in aggressive androgyny: full lips, soft lines, fantastic cape, and whimsically campy plume (he looks like a chorus girl from the *Folies Bergère*). The curled horns of a ram's head at the midriff perhaps suggest a vagina. The middle soldier, whose partial disrobing exposes taut buttocks and muscular thighs, grips mightily the pommel of his sword, a weapon overtly phallic in placement and design. The rounded end of this implement bursts skyward in an explosion of black and white striations, a quintessentially Art Deco ejaculation. Parthenis's flute, her delta-shaped (and therefore vaginally suggestive) instrument, lies trampled and discarded on the floor, pointing towards her assailant's similarly dropped spear. Cullen loads the scene with

11 The illustration is also a perfect example of the displacement of gender marginalization onto race marginalization: the sexual proclivities of the boys are signified not so much by physical position but physical race, here substituting for gender deviance. For more on this phenomenon, see Mumford 1996.395–414 as well as Douglas 1995.



Figure 1. Charles Cullen's illustration of Countess Cullen's poem "Tableau" from the collection *Color*. 1927. Pg. 14. Used by permission. Copyrights held by Thompson and Thompson, Brooklyn, NY.

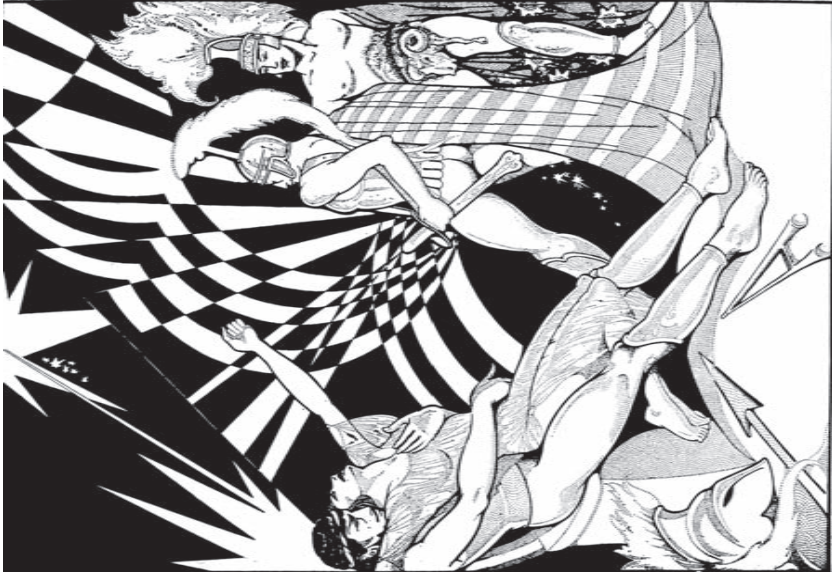


Figure 2. Charles Cullen's illustration of "The Little Flute Player" from *The Mimes of the Courtesans*. 1928.

shocking detail: he discards the relative subtlety of his illustration for Countee Cullen's "Tableau" and, instead, invests the Lucianic dialogue with unparalleled explicitness. This is the same dialogue in which the translator Hillman added an additional passage concerning assault and fellatio; Cullen likewise intensifies the carnality of this almost hallucinatory scene of rape.

A fascination with the seamier side of sex pervades the Lucian volume. In his rather loose translation of the Ampelis and Chrysis conversation, Hillman records two hetairai as they reminisce and complain about encounters that included both sex and violence. In this particular exchange, Chrysis laments that her lover, Gorgias, often strikes her in a jealous rage (34): "he raises Cain and whips me and gives me not an obole." Her companion replies that "Jealous men are always liberal givers," and implies that Chrysis should expect great returns if she can stoke Gorgias's jealousy into gifts of cash. Although Lucian generally portrays these violent encounters in an unsympathetic light, Hillman impishly entitles the chapter "The Pleasure of Being Beaten," a reference, one assumes, to the material rewards that Ampelis herself received after one particularly lucrative instance of whipping. But it is presumably a nod as well to the growing freedom of sexual experimentation in contemporary America, one in which, particularly in homosexual circles, one *could* discover the pleasure in being beaten (Chauncey 1994.220). Cullen's illustration (figure 3) depicts an obviously sadomasochistic scenario, with a man, clearly the dominant figure, grasping the hair of the hetaira as he prepares to whip her with a cat-o'-nine-tails. A previous lover (or previous trick?) disappears through an archway, face disguised, but with his naked and shapely figure on full display. Sunlight streams through the illustration, indicating that this pleasure in beating is not confined solely to furtive nighttime forays in sadomasochism. Cullen's drawing neither glorifies the violence nor disparages it: like the sun, the viewer peers into a private act in which the *viewer*, as well as the courtesan, may derive some pleasure from the beating. (And as so often, Cullen throws in a visual joke, this time juxtaposing the exciting, sinuous depiction of the S&M beating with the static, staid representation of the wall painting—an image that looks like any number of vase representations of, e.g., the Panathenaic procession in Athens. In this way, Cullen's modern construction of ancient Greece literally relegates the traditional images to the background.)

Both Hillman and Cullen make curious choices in their depiction of the Clonarion/Leaina conversation, one of few passages in ancient literature

to sympathetically discuss female same-sex eroticism.¹² Hillman shortens the dialogue slightly by omitting the eventual references to french kissing, full-body embraces, and the fondling of breasts (ὑπανοίγουσαι τὸ στόμα, καὶ περιέβαλλον καὶ τοὺς μαστοὺς ἔθλιβον, 5.3). The translator does emphasize, however, the element of shame—a shame partially overcome as Leaina details her first lesbian experience. Leaina’s companion Clonarium presses her for details and, in his investigation, acts as a confessor figure (73):

CLONARION

I have heard a queer thing said about you, Leaina. People say Megilla, the wealthy lady from Lesbos, is in love with you, as if she were a man, and that she—I can’t explain how—but—. I have heard it said that the two of you couple up just like—

LEAINA (*Abashed silence*)

There is something touching about Leaina’s reticence, her initial reluctance to spill her erotic secrets. Her unwillingness also heightens the voyeuristic sensation that pervades the Lucianic dialogues: only “intelligent moderns” can break through both the shame and the silence that surrounds deviant sexual desire. Finally, Leaina breaks down and details her amorous adventures with the lesbian Megilla (74–75):

LEAINA

You see, Megilla and Demonassa, the Corinthian, sweating and very hot, pulled off her false hair—I had never suspected her of wearing a wig. And I saw her head was smooth-shaven as that of a young athlete. I was quite scared to see this.

But Megilla spoke up and said to me:

“Tell me, O Leaina, have you ever seen a better looking young man?”

12 Besides the poetry of Sappho, one could add the tale of Iphis and Ianthe at *Metamorphoses* 9.666–797; Iphis’s metamorphosis into a man rather muddles things, however.

"But I see no young man here, Megilla!" I told her.
 "Now, now! Don't you effeminate me!" she reproved.
 "You must understand my name is Megillos. Demonassa
 is my wife."

The shock of Megilla's gender-bending follicular flourish leads to further revelations concerning the relationship between Megilla and Demonassa. A change in grammatical gender—Megilla to Megillos—reflects the lesbian's transformation from effeminacy to masculinity, even from woman to "husband." Though genuinely startled, Leaina presses for further details concerning Megilla's/Megillos's anatomy and ends up flirting (76): "'And do those [same-sex] desires of yours suffice you?' I asked, smiling." Megilla/Megillos responds with a come-on (76): "Let me have my own way with you, Leaina, if you don't believe me . . . and you will soon see that I have nothing to answer men for. I have something that resembles man's estate. Come on, let me do what I want to do and soon you will understand." One consequence of this conversation is that, epistemologically speaking, discourse alone is not enough to secure knowledge: Leaina can only understand same-sex desire by *performing* same-sex desire. The conversation ends with Clonarion (clearly excited) pressing Leaina for further *specific* details about how Megilla managed to be a man in bed. Leaina stops the conversation abruptly (76): "Please, don't ask me for details. These are shameful things. By the Mistress of Heaven, I will never, never, tell you that!"

In his characteristically campy illustration (figure 4), Cullen captures the revelatory moment of sexual epiphany, as Megilla melodramatically rips off her wig and discloses to Leaina an indication of her true sexual inclinations. Megilla's bushy wig hangs limply—and suggestively—at her midriff, as she gazes longingly at Leaina. At the point of contact, a star bursts behind the couple, emphasizing the electricity of the moment. Full-length robes crisscross the scene lazily, juxtaposing feminine sinuousness with the masculine rigidity of the flaring, phallic columns. As if to reduce still further the importance of traditional masculinity, a small *kouros*—an heroic nude statue of a boy—rises in the bottom left corner, only to be dwarfed by the women center stage. The whole scene toys with constructions of gender, as the now masculine Megillos awaits the response of Leaina—and of the "intelligent modern."

Cullen's transgressive illustrations of Lucian—such as the lesbian scene—often dovetail with contemporary notions of homosexuals as an "intermediate" or third sex, an appellation employed both within and without

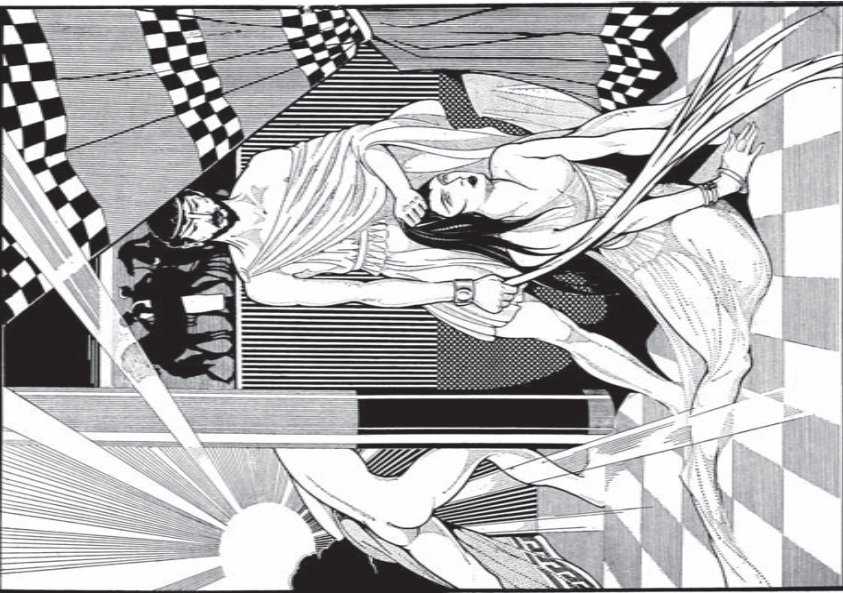


Figure 3. Charles Cullen's illustration of "The Pleasure of Being Beaten" from *The Mines of the Courtesans*. 1928.



Figure 4. Charles Cullen's illustration of "The Lesbians" from *The Mines of the Courtesans*. 1928.

the gay community.¹³ Such a designation emphasizes the challenge that homosexuality presents to a society most comfortable with the binary scheme of male/female: the homosexual then emerges as a liminal entity compelled to shuffle between categories. Two illustrations in particular demonstrate Cullen's penchant for retrojecting androgyny into his Art Deco Greece. In the dialogue between Philinna and her mother, the young hetaira remarks that she slept with another man at a banquet because her current innamorato had been cavorting with the beautiful (and dangerous) courtesan Thais, and she wished revenge in kind. Cullen's illustration (figure 5) of the scene captures perfectly not only Thais' brazen dancing—her enticing gams are a focal point of the Lucianic dialogue—but also the sexual licentiousness of Philinna and her new partner, Lamprias. Though there is no particular basis for such a characterization in the text, Cullen dramatically effeminizes Lamprias, endowing him with smooth curves, hairless chest, full lips, delicate features, and ornamented hair: in short, a pretty boy. Though the soldiers of figure 2 certainly exhibit some features normally considered feminine, Lamprias more closely approximates androgyny. In this case, the man who shares some feminine features forms an erotic liaison with a woman.

Cullen magnifies the attraction of an androgyne in his illustration (figure 6) for Chelidonion and Drosis, in which an older, lecherous philosopher seduces away a young boy-lover, Clinias, from the clutches of the love-sick hetaira Chelidonion. Described by his love-lorn admirer as a "kitten" (again in Hillman's quirky translation, 150), Clinias, depicted in the upper left of the illustration, certainly does appear androgynously cuddly: he possesses feminine eyebrows, supple limbs, full lips, and a suggestive tilt of the hips, particularly when contrasted with the static, rather more traditionally masculine statue of Apollo in the lower-right side (complete with male genitals—the only explicit depiction in the volume). Whereas the effeminate Lamprias of figure 5 was (seemingly) a one-woman man, the similarly pretty Clinias manages to capture the affections of both women *and* men; he sports the nubile body of a young athlete—but the face of Dorothy Parker. Taking his cue from the erotic situations presented by Lucian, Cullen takes this opportunity to sketch into the past a liminal "intermediate sex," thereby blurring the boundaries between 1920s New York and fourth-century Athens.

13 Chauncey 1994.47–63, especially chapter 2, "The Fairy as an Intermediate Sex."

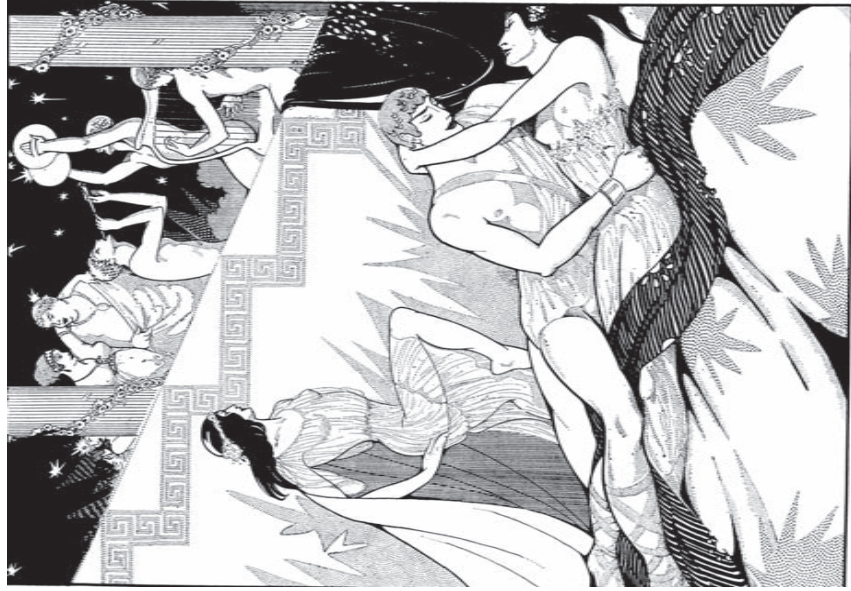


Figure 5. Charles Cullen's illustration of "A Mother's Advice" from *The Mimes of the Courtesans*. 1928.



Figure 6. Charles Cullen's illustration of "The Philosopher" from *The Mimes of the Courtesans*. 1928.

Cullen's liberties in terms of gender construction are perhaps most surprising in his stunning illustration of the dialogue between the courtesan Typhaina and her lover for the evening, Charmides. As the dialogue begins, Typhaina complains that Charmides seems to lack interest in her (113): "To hire a courtesan, pay her five drachmas, go to bed with her and then turn your back on her and weep and groan—that is a dirty trick to play on a woman with feelings . . . And now you keep on sobbing like a whipped infant. Why all the humidity, Charmides? Don't hide anything from me!" Charmides, alas, is not forthcoming, and Typhaina presses her point: "It isn't me that you love—that much is certain. I am but three inches away from you. We are both stark naked. And you don't seem to get excited over that fact. You repel me when I want to take you in my arms. Why, you have even dragged your clothes into bed and put the bundle as a dike between us, lest my fine emotions flow over and get you wet."

Tellingly, it is at this critical emotional juncture—when the reader is as puzzled as Typhaina about Charmides' erotic tastes—that Cullen illustrates the dialogue (figure 7). On the one hand, Cullen is scrupulous in his attention to detail: as indicated in the text, the two figures are in bed, close to each other, naked, with a heap of clothes separating them like "a dike." On the other hand, if a viewer were to examine the illustration *apart* from the accompanying text, he would be hard pressed to identify for certain the sex of Charmides. Whereas Typhaina's sex is (shall we say) abundantly clear, the long, curvy backside of Charmides (combined with a curious, pointillist hairstyle) cannot be definitively declared male *or* female. Cullen engages in gender ambiguity at this precise point in Lucian's narrative because an "intelligent modern," reading Lucian through the lens of contemporary trends in sexual behavior, might wonder if, in fact, Charmides' bedtime repulsion of Typhaina indicates a more general aversion to women; in other words, if Charmides is, in 1920s lingo, a fairy. We discover later in the dialogue that Charmides has lost his heart to an older paramour and is apparently heterosexual. But at the exact moment of confusion in the text, Cullen mirrors the chaos with a figure equally feminine and masculine.

Cullen appends to the beginning of the Lucian volume an illustration (figure 8) of an orgy that has no single referent, but rather encapsulates the titillating or decadent features of Lucian's work. In this way, it synthesizes precisely the ethos that pervades the volume as a whole. The drawing portrays a swirl of bodies, touching, probing, kissing, eating. To the left appears to be a courtesan turning away from a pair of lesbians (the rightmost might be a particularly effeminate man, but the wide fillet suggests a woman

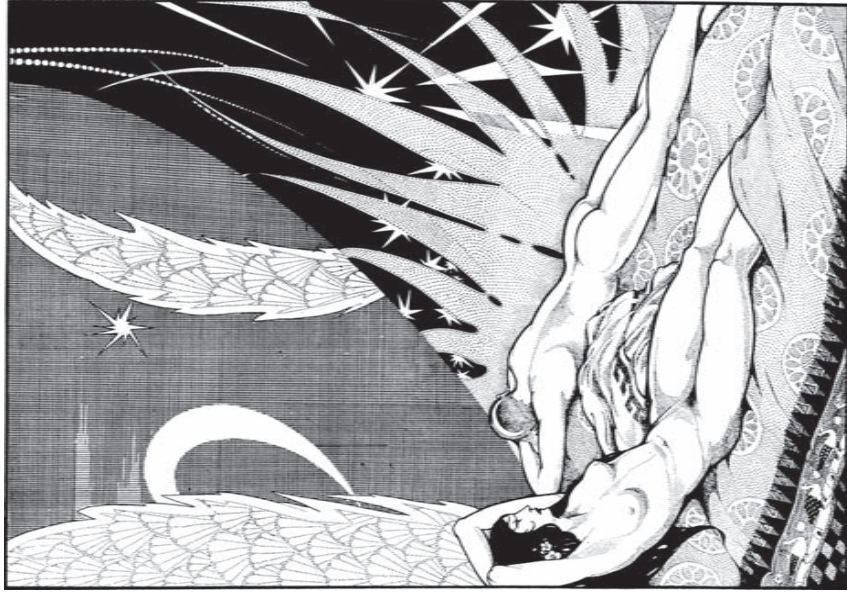


Figure 7. Charles Cullen's illustration of "At Night" from *The Mimes of the Courtesans*. 1928.



Figure 8. Charles Cullen's frontispiece illustration from *The Mimes of the Courtesans*. 1928.

and the shaved head a lesbian). The middle features a rotund epicure, an ecstatic lyre player, a supplicating lover, and an aloof courtesan. To the right, a man and woman exchange mutual caresses. Everything about the illustration is lightly, intoxicatingly seamy: the states of casual undress, the number and nature of the embraces, the sheer mass of flesh on proud display. The illustration also includes what I perceive to be a visual joke: the back “wall” of the symposium is painted like an ancient black-figure vase, complete with dueling warriors and stern martial postures. Cullen emphasizes here the alluring decadence of the symposium at the expense of the traditional representations by and of ancient Greeks, including depictions of ho-hum border skirmishes. The head of the sleek black slave “breaks” the border of the frieze, a parody of the helmed gods and heroes of the *Iliad* whose stature cannot be contained within the borders of a vase. In the topsy-turvy world of Cullen's Lucian, it is the sleek slave, not Mars or Athena, who is “god” of the symposium. From the very first page (and the very first orgy), Cullen's art indicates that he takes up the translator's challenge to present Lucian's “intimate sex details” with complete frankness and even “humanity.”

To sum up: in *The Mimes of the Courtesans*, the translator and the illustrator attempt to appropriate Lucian as a proto-modernist at ease with outré sexual practices while they also explore (and perhaps redraw) the boundaries of sexual desire. In this respect, the volume combines contemporary trends in sexual historiography (particularly of the classical world) with parallel trends in illustration and graphic design. It is also an appropriation full of irony; as Simon Goldhill elucidates in his excellent volume on classical reception, Lucian's later (re)construction as a Greek is itself problematic. Lucian was, after all, a Syrian, writing in Greek only as a second language primarily for the delectation of Greek-speaking Romans (Goldhill 2002.60–107). Though Lucian's dialogues are replete with the stock characters of Attic New Comedy, Lucian's Greece is itself a literary never-never land, far removed in time and place from the circumstances of its author.¹⁴ The translator Hillman takes it on faith that Lucian's *Dialogues* describe accurately “one phase of Greek life,” but Lucian's work is just as much a construction of antiquity as Hillman's own. Taken together, the two authors demonstrate how the reception of the classical world can follow its own trajectory, leading us ever further from (or perhaps ever closer to?) the sexual world of fourth-century Greece.

14 For a brief examination of how Lucian manipulates New Comedy characters in the *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, see Anderson 1976.94–97.

I conclude with a sobering postscript. I first discovered Hillman and Cullen's *Mimes of the Courtesans* by accident; I was perusing volumes of Lucian in Harvard University's Widener Library—a Mecca, it seems, for neglected Americana—when *Mimes* literally fell off the shelf. It was number 364 of the 1050 printed copies, and one glance at the Cochlis and Parthenis illustration (with its bizarre imagery) prompted me to investigate further the social and interpretative forces that would—even *could*—produce such a drawing. Though the *Mimes* had been checked out several times, I couldn't find any references to it in any standard catalogues of book illustrations or in the scholarship on Lucian; I chalked up its neglect to its age and low circulation. In 2002—as I was researching this article—I discovered that the Dutch firm Fredonia Books was reprinting the volume in paperback (the American copyright had just lapsed). I therefore ordered a copy and awaited the volume's arrival in the mail. What I received, however, only confirmed that the social forces alluded to by Hillman in his introduction still exert considerable power. Not only was the edition poorly reproduced, but *every single one* of Cullen's illustrations discussed in this article had been excised without indication. It is not that the editors couldn't reproduce full-page drawings: two illustrations that did not feature sex made the cut, as did the introductory panel. The bowdlerization was therefore editorial. To add insult to injury, the editors proudly trumpet their series' aim “to make original editions of historical works available to scholars at an economical price . . . The text remains unaltered to retain historical authenticity.” The text, perhaps—but not Cullen's illustrations, from which impressionable scholars apparently must be guarded. Hillman's preface, then, far from being pugnacious, was, in fact, overly optimistic; apparently, *Mimes of the Courtesans* still awaits its audience of appreciative, and intelligent, moderns.

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